

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Russell, "Existence and Description"

I.

- Russell is writing about general propositions and existence claims — i.e., universal and existential quantification. Importantly, Russell claims:

I want to say emphatically that general propositions are to be interpreted as not involving existence. When I say, for instance, 'All Greeks are men', I do not want you to suppose that that implies that there are Greeks. (23)

And:

All statements about all the members of a class that has no members are true, because the contradictory of any general statement does assert existence and is therefore false in this case. (24)

Also note the entertaining comments on Leibniz.

- There are 3 kinds of propositional functions: necessary, possible, impossible. Propositional functions have undetermined constituents (variables) which, when provided, generate propositions. Russell claims that modal operators apply to propositional functions, and not to propositions.

- An aid to understanding existence:

When you take any propositional function and assert of it that it is possible, that it is sometimes true, that gives you the fundamental meaning of 'existence'. You may express it by saying that there is at least one value of  $x$  for which that propositional function is true. (25)

- But does *this* sound right?

Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function. (25)

Well, he means it:

...the actual things that there are in the world do not exist, or, at least, that is putting it too strongly, because that is utter nonsense. To say that they do not exist is strictly nonsense, but to say that they do exist is also strictly nonsense. (25)

- Russell argues that there are both general facts and general propositions. Importantly, general facts cannot reduce to atomic facts:

It is perfectly clear, I think, that when you have enumerated all the atomic facts in the world, it is a further fact about the world that those are all the atomic facts there are about the world, and that is just as much an objective fact about the world as any of them are. (27)

- Russell is interested in uncovering the logical form of our ordinary language expressions. For the kinds of truths philosophers (and logicians) are concerned with is found in studying the logical form.

Q: What are the constituents of logical propositions?

- Russell spurns our everyday talk of particular things as existing:

I mean, it is perfectly clear that, if there were such a thing as this existence of individuals that we talk of, it would be absolutely impossible for it not to apply, and that is the characteristic of a mistake. (29)

II.

- Take a singular existence statement like 'Deepthroat exists.' Russell does not think that Deepthroat is a constituent of that proposition.

◦ Russell uses his, now familiar, theory of descriptions to convert sentences like 'Romulus did not exist' into propositional functions.

If it were really a name, the question of existence could not arise, because a name has got to name something or it is not a name, and if there is no such person as Romulus, there cannot be a name for that person who is not there, so that this single word 'Romulus' is really a sort of truncated or telescoped description, and if you think of it as a name, you will get into logical errors. (30)

- On definite descriptions:

◦ They are such by their form alone, regardless of whether the description succeeds at picking out a unique individual.

- Definition descriptions are not names, in Russell's special sense of 'name'. Names are *simple* symbols.

For the name itself is merely a means of pointing to the thing, and does not occur in what you are asserting, so that if one thing has two names, you make exactly the same assertion whichever of the two names you use, provided they are really names and not truncated descriptions. (31)

All true identity statements between names are tautologies. (Note Russell's use/mention distinction involving names, p. 32.)

Russell returns to our old topic of identity:

Identity is a rather puzzling thing at first sight. When you say 'Scott is the author of *Waverley*', you are half-tempted to think there are two people, one of whom is Scott and the other the author of *Waverley*, and they happen to be the same. That is obviously absurd, but that is the sort of way one is always tempted to deal with identity. (32)

- In the logical analysis of a proposition, the definite description disappears. This is because the definite description could fail to refer, yet the sentence it appears in still be meaningful.

Note his p. 33 comments on the tenseless use of 'exists'.

When I say 'The author of *Waverley* exists', I mean that there is an entity *c* such that '*x* wrote *Waverley*' is true when *x* is *c*, and is false when *x* is not *c*. 'The author of *Waverley*' as a constituent has quite disappeared there, so that when I say 'The author of *Waverley* exists', I am not saying anything about the author of *Waverley*. (33)

- Russell explicitly denies that existence is a property — see p. 34.

- In conclusion:

So the individuals that there are in the world do not exist, or rather it is nonsense to say that they exist and nonsense to say that they do not exist. It is not a thing you can say when you have named them, but only when you have described them. (35)